

# The Shrinking Space for Free Media under Modi rule

The Modi Government's rebuttal of former Twitter CEO's charges rings hollow in the face of India's downward spiral on the Press Freedom Index



Jack Dorsey, former Twitter Chief Executive Officer, has recently claimed that his erstwhile microblogging platform was pressurised by the Narendra Modi Government to block the contents and suspend the accounts, which were critical of the establishment's position during the farmers' protests. In an interview with YouTube Channel *Breaking Points* (June 12), he said that Twitter India had received "many requests" to remove contents, which were criticising the Government's position on the farm laws, failing which, the houses of its employees would be raided and its office would be shut down.

Soon after the telecast of the interview and wide public criticism of the Government on the social media platform, the ruling establishment found itself in an embarrassing situation. Had the statement been made by a leader of the opposition party, the mainstream media might have encountered it easily and the ED, IT, and police could have raided his/her house. But the allegation came from a former CEO of Twitter, who is a US citizen. Given this reality, the Modi government resorted to the "sovereignty" principle to shrug off the charges.

The person who came out to defend the Government was Union Minister of State Rajeev Chandrasekhar. Without citing strong evidence, the minister rejected Dorsey's statement as



The Indian authorities applied heavy pressure on Twitter to deal with accounts critical of New Delhi's handling of protests in 2021, according to the platform's co-founder and former CEO Jack Dorsey

"an outright lie". In his Tweet (July 13), Chandrasekhar made counter-allegations that Twitter India "had a problem accepting the sovereignty of Indian law". Dismissing the charge of censorship, he argued that "misinformation" was in circulation during the farmers' protests and Twitter was obliged to "remove misinformation" under Indian laws.

Chandrasekhar's explanation leaves many questions unanswered. For example, Dorsey was not the first person to question the shrinking media space under the Modi rule. Moreover, the "sovereignty" principle -- which may be defined as the State being the only legitimate

actor to make laws within its territory without any external interference -- has become a magic tool in the hands of the ruling establishment to brush aside any external criticism about human rights violation and assault journalists within India. But when any foreign media writes a single line in praise of PM Modi, it is hugely celebrated as the rise of India under his leadership.

Jack Dorsey was not the first person to point to the state of duress under which journalists and social media creators work in India. Earlier Twitter owner Elon Musk, in an interview with BBC, pointed to the prevalence of "quite strict" rules for social

media. Apart from them, a large number of journalists were also arrested. For example, Siddique Kappan, a Kerala-based journalist, was jailed under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, (UAPA) and sedition law three years ago and kept in jail for 846 days. His only "crime" was that he tried to reach Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, to do a ground report about an alleged rape and murder of a young Dalit woman. Getting bail for an accused charged with UAPA becomes remote. Similarly, the sedition law (Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code), too, has been grossly misused. Enacted by the British Raj in 1860, it was used against the freedom fighters. However,

the "nationalist" BJP government has little hesitation in invoking the colonial law against its people.

Media reports suggest that Twitter was asked by the Modi Government to suspend as many as 1,200 accounts for their alleged "Khalistan" links during farmers' protests in 2021. Following the instruction, Twitter blocked some accounts but later revoked the blocking. Such a move angered the Government, which was desperate to control the rising tide of farmers' unrest. While the mainstream media was obediently following the Government's line by defending the farm laws and demonizing protesters with wild allegations, several social media platforms emerged to counter the official narrative. Caught in such an embarrassing situation, the Central Government wanted Twitter to fully toe its line. But Twitter went on to flag some posts of the leaders of the ruling parties in May 2021. This further irritated the Government and it became so furious that it accused the opposition party of "manipulating" the media to malign PM Modi's image and that of the Central Government. Later, the ruling establishment rushed Delhi police to Twitter's office in Gurgaon and served it a notice. Chandrasekhar, the minister, completely ignored these details, while calling Dorsey's "an outright lie".

Even reliable figures weigh against the minister's claim. The

figures of the National Crime Records Bureau for 2019 show that the number of people arrested under the UAPA has seen an increase of over 72% from 2015. Many of the arrested persons must have been journalists. From the valley of Kashmir to the Adivasi lands in central India, from the Hindi heartland in Uttar Pradesh to the western and southern India states of Gujarat and Karnataka, the BJP regime targeted journalists. In December 2022, the report of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) pointed to the high rate of journalists being jailed in India. Six months later, CPJ issued another statement dated April 20, 2023, and said that "In March 2023, India saw several attacks on press freedom, including the arrest of Kashmiri journalist Irfan Mehraj; the suspension in India of Twitter handles belonging to an outlet and at least three journalists; and death threats to journalist and fact-checker Mohammad Zubair". Writing in *The New York Times* (March 8), Anuradha Bhasin, executive editor of *The Kashmir Times*, also gave horrible accounts of the sufferings of journalists in Jammu and Kashmir and the muzzling of free speech, post-abrogation of article 370.

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